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AUTHOR James, David L.
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ABSTRACT

A review of the educational research on humor use will answer many questions about how it works in the classroom. Humor can be classified in three ways, each with its own primary function: superiority theory--sociological function; relief theory--psychological function; and incongruity theory--intellectual function. Classes filled with relevant humor are perceived by students as interesting, high in support, and affirming. Humor has been found to enhance both creativity and learning. Some studies, which have been replicated, prove that using relevant humor items 3-4 times per hour for an entire semester in college statistics and psychology classes can significantly increase final exam scores over control groups using no planned humor. Based on research, it is safe to conclude the following--humor: can create a supportive learning climate; can increase attention and enjoyment; can assist in learning and retention; can enhance divergent thinking skills; and should be considered an effective teacher trait. Teachers can do the following with humor: use relevant humor in assigned readings; create a humor bulletin board for cartoons, jokes, or quotes; use humorous sentences or problems when writing tests; incorporate humorous videos or TV programs in class as appropriate; create a Top 10 List (David Letterman style) dealing with the topic at hand; and propose a Riddle of the Day or Week. (Contains 13 references.) (NKA)

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Theory and Research

By Dr. David L. James

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I first became interested in humor and its affect in education as a writer in the Michigan Council for the Arts poets-in-the-schools program. When I would walk into high school English classrooms and be introduced as a guest poet, students' heads would fall, eyes roll, audible statements of displeasure could be heard. After a few minutes of reading some funny poems, I would have the attention of all students. Within ten minutes, I would have the whole class writing poetry and enjoying it.

Many people assume that the use of humor in the classroom is beneficial. What kind of humor? How does humor affect the classroom climate? How much humor should be used? How does humor relate to learning? Does humor enhance students' attitude toward a subject? A review of the educational research on humor use will give us many of the answers.

Before exploring how humor affects learning, we must understand the theories and functions of humor. For general purposes, I have classified humor in three ways, each with its own primary function (Hebert, 1991; Endlich, 1993; Gutwirth, 1993):

Superiority Theory— sociological function

Relief Theory— psychological function

Incongruity Theory— intellectual function

Superiority Theory

This theory defines humor as a perception of superiority over others. Plato wrote, "We laugh when we see the weakness of another." This is the foundational theory behind ethnic jokes, put-downs, ridicule, even slapstick comedy. Who among us hasn't laughed when we've witnessed some anonymous person slip on the ice and fall?

The Superiority Theory has a social function; it is used to create a bond within a group. People who laugh together at the expense of others feel better about themselves and solidify the group dynamics or cohesiveness. Humor and ridicule are used to keep members within the implied group norms. If my teenaged son wore a suit and tie to school, he would be the laughing stock of the day. The message would be crystal clear: do not wear that clothing again. Here is a common example of Superiority Theory humor, a lawyer joke: How do you know when a lawyer is lying? When her lips move.

Relief Theory

Influenced largely by Sigmund Freud's ideas, the Relief Theory explains humor as a tension and anxiety reliever, an expression of our primal and animal desires, and a tool with which we defend ourselves. Freud felt most jokes dealt with pent-up desires and instincts; in fact, sex jokes are the most popular type among the general population. The Relief Theory also explains the cause behind black humor— humor about death, catastrophes, dire human situations. Jokes about O.J. Simpson, Monica Lewinsky, and the Challenger disaster all come to mind. In the midst of a war on terrorism, Taliban jokes abound. Mark Twain once wrote, "There is no humor in the Garden of Eden." Pain, embarrassment, and suffering are necessary ingredients for this kind of humor to exist.

Humor of this genre satisfies a psychological function by allowing people to deal with off-limit, frightening, and taboo subjects. In jokes, people can say and do things most would never dream of doing. People can confront their fears, frustrations, anxieties, and tensions. People can make light of terrible experiences, providing some relief from the despair. As Woody Allen said, "I'm not afraid of dying; I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Incongruity Theory

This form of humor is generated by surprise and trickery. The absurdity of certain situations will often cause laughter. A businessman walking into his office with a pair of Groucho Marx glasses can set off belly laughs. A dog walking in a field is not funny. But a dog walking into a classroom will start a chorus of laughing. Why? Because it's unexpected; it's incongruous.

The intellectual function behind the Incongruity Theory attempts to stretch our brains and imaginations. Cognitively, we try to figure out the puzzle (or punchline) of a joke. There is always an unexpected twist or turn that catches us off-guard and makes us laugh. The mere act of cognitively tricking us causes humor.

Most humor has elements of all three theories embedded within. In educational settings, the key is to use relevant, content-related humor that is neither demeaning nor hostile. Racist, sexist, and aggressive remarks, even though humorous to some, will have negative consequences on the classroom climate and on learning (Bryant et al., 1980; Gorham and Christophel, 1990).

It is well known that the climate of a classroom can have a major affect on learning. Research has shown that students in supportive climates retain more information than

students in defensive climates (Darling and Civikly, 1987). Here are the characteristics of both types of environments:

Supportive Climates	**Defensive Climates**
Sense of equality	Teacher superiority
Sense of empathy for students	Neutral attitude toward students
Problem orientation	Control orientation
Descriptive grading	Evaluative grading

Classes with no humor are perceived as boring but high in order. Classrooms with hostile humor are perceived as unfriendly and competitive. However, classes filled with relevant humor are perceived as interesting, high in support, and affirming by students. These are precisely the characteristics of the supportive learning environment. In another study, a researcher found that teachers who were rated by their peers as having a high sense of humor also had classrooms that were perceived by students as being more positive and supportive (Ziv et al., 1979).

How much humor is appropriate? Numerous studies show that higher-rated teachers use more humor than lower-rated teachers (Murray, 1983; Stuart and Rosenfeld, 1994). In one study, the highest-rated teachers used 63% more humor than low and middle-rated teachers (Gorham and Christophel, 1990). The general rule of thumb at the college level is to incorporate 3-5 relevant, content-related items per 50 minute class.

Humor has been found to enhance both creativity and learning. Several studies have show that listening to humorous recordings or watching funny movies help students score significantly higher on creativity tests. Other studies, which have been replicated, prove that using relevant humor items 3-4 times per hour for an entire semester in college statistics and

psychology can significantly increase final exam scores over control groups using no planned humor (Ziv, 1976, 1983, 1988).

One doctoral study examined the value of using humorous content material in an educational setting. In an introduction to poetry unit for high school students, teachers used one set of lessons with only humorous poems, the same set of lessons for another class with only serious poems. Those students introduced to poetry with humorous content material statistically enhanced their attitude toward poetry as an art form (James, 1998). This study is important because it implies that the positive affects of humor can be gained even if the teacher does not have an exceptional sense of humor.

Humor has only been recognized as a legitimate area for study in education for the last 25 years. Based upon the educational research completed so far, it is safe to conclude the following:

- Humor can create a supportive learning climate.
- Humor can increase attention and enjoyment.
- Humor can assist in learning and retention.
- Humor can enhance divergent thinking skills.
- Humor should be considered an effective teacher trait.

Humor can be a mighty tool in any teacher's little bag of tricks. As long as it is content-related and used appropriately, humor can set the great teachers apart from the average ones and, in fact, it does.

Here are a few practical ways for teachers to incorporate humor into their classrooms.

1. Use relevant content humor in assigned readings. Find humorous examples in history, English, science, etc.

2. Writing Assignments: have students find at least three cartoons that are related to a class topic or concept. Have students explain what each cartoon is portraying and how it relates to class.
3. Humor Bulletin Board: create a humor board in the classroom for cartoons, jokes, or quotes. Everything must be humorous, appropriate, and content-related.
4. Use three or four humorous cartoons, stories, examples, anecdotes within every 50-minute lecture. Make one intentional mistake and see if anyone catches it.
5. Use humorous sentences or problems when writing tests. Add a humorous test question at the end of every exam for extra credit.
6. Incorporate humorous videos or tapes or TV programs in class as appropriate. Be sure there is an obvious relatedness to the subject.
7. Cartoon Caption Match: collect relevant cartoons and remove the captions. Working in groups, have students match the correct caption with the appropriate cartoon, or have students create their own captions.
8. Top 10 List: in true David Letterman style, create a silly top 10 list dealing with the topic at hand and read it every Friday.
9. Riddle of the Day or Week: pose a humorous riddle for extra credit or just for fun.

Dr. David L. James
Oakland Community College
27055 Orchard Lake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48334

Dljames@occ.cc.mi.us
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David James teaches English for Oakland Community College in Michigan after working for 21 years as a college administrator. He earned his doctorate in education from Wayne State University. Two books of his poetry have been published: A Heart Out of This World (Carnegie Mellon University Press) and Do Not Give Dogs What Is Holy (March Street Press). Most recently, his articles have appeared in College and University, Journal of Leadership Studies, and Adult Learning.

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